

ZYGOTE

Electronic terror alerts are coming to a phone near you, writes Zygote, but if you're easily alarmed then give John Prescott's website a miss. And watch where you put that banana, please

TREAT THEM LEAN

It's always nice to know our taxes are being put to best use. HM Revenue and Customs has invested some of our money in a scheme to tidy up the working environment of its employees, and in particular to make sure desktop equipment is in the best possible position for the wellbeing of computer operators.

The project, codenamed Lean, has been set up to implement the 2002 Display Screen Equipment Regulations, and is masterminded by those efficient consultants Unipart. The most widely reported example of the Unipart Lean strategy involves sticking lines of tape on civil servants' desktops, so they can see where to put monitors and personal items. One Newcastle victim was asked if the banana on her desk was "active or inactive" before the consultants could decide where it should be placed in relation to her computer.

Zygote does not have access to the file that contains her response, but it is hoped she demonstrated her banana was active by shoving it up her questioner's rectum. The cost of project Lean is £7.4 million.

TAKE FIVE

This is a public service announcement. Please beware of the recent offer from MI5 to text or email information to you about national security alerts. MI5 has invited members of the public to

register and benefit from electronic terror forecasts. Obviously these can't be too specific, otherwise the terrorists would know they'd been rumbled, so email alerts will have to be more generic. Something like, "A toxic cloud is moving in from the Atlantic, so please wear a hat. The recent flood of illegal aliens is likely to disrupt traffic, blow down trees and damage property. People in the Sellafeld area are advised to smear their dogs with sun cream," and so on.

There were red faces at MI5 in January, when it was revealed that the email-subscriber data is stored in Seattle, and can fall under the jurisdiction of US law-enforcement authorities. But Zygote believes the new MI5 service has been set up for a more profitable purpose. What MI5 really wants to do is capture your details and flog off the data. If you don't want to be bombarded by spam from dodgy security companies, make sure you register under a false name, so you can recognise any abuse of your trust. Apparently, there are legions of Saddams and Osamas already registered, so think up something less obvious. Such as Ira.

SPITTING IMAGE

Just when you thought the problem of junk messages and virus attacks couldn't get any worse, the spammers are turning to Spam Over Internet Telephony, or SPIT.

Spam voicemail is starting to inundate inboxes and overload networks, and mobile phones are now subject to virus and hack attacks, which can have disastrous consequences if a phone is linked to a desktop system.

The Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003 were meant to restrict unsolicited electronic communications, including SPIT. Further restrictions kick in where VoIP is used to send pre-recorded messages via an automated calling system, including protection for numbers registered with the Telephone Preference Service. But just as with email-based spam, if the SPIT merchants operate from countries that are not bound by UK law, nothing can be done to stop them.

Because of the random nature of SPIT dialling, Zygote is concerned by the prospect of children receiving junk calls on their ubiquitous mobile phones, involving premium-rate numbers for gambling, porn or racist organisations. Children's phones should have an automatic white-list facility allowing them to receive calls from friends and family only. That would protect them from SPIT, and it would also stop them downloading those bloody awful ringtones.

VISITING THE JOHN

As a grateful nation makes way for a new Deputy Prime Minister,

Zygote thought it would be in the public interest to examine the history of John Prescott's website. It has been a jolly affair, with lots of purple text and smiley pictures of the man himself, all spread over the 128 pages of www.dpm.gov.uk.

When questioned in the House of Commons about the popularity of his website, Big John stated that it had received 2,771 visits during 2006. It is also on the record that 3,137 employees in the Deputy Prime Minister's department are benefiting from a £30 million contract to supply them with new Microsoft Exchange software. You'd think the recipients of such largesse would visit their boss's website regularly. Not so.

Zygote is surprised by how many employees have not visited Mr Prescott's site to express their gratitude on his Feedback page, but perhaps they were simply too busy working for the nation. However, it can be safely assumed that three-quarters of them logged on to their department's site once only, just to see if they merited a name check. Hmm, let's see, three quarters of 3,137 employees is 2,352, so that leaves 419 visits unaccounted for from the 2,771 audited total. Did you know a public website can expect to receive eight visits a week from robots and spiders? That's 416 a year, which leaves three visits unaccounted for during 2006.

Mr Prescott is a modest man, so Zygote believes he would take a peek at his own website no more than once, which means there were two visits from members of the public. Zygote himself made one visit in the interests of research, leaving a grand total of one unidentified member of the public who visited the Deputy Prime Minister's website. Whoever you are, please make yourself known, so you can be detained for your own safety under Section four of the Mental Health Act. ☞

Great Moments in Computing
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231: FLASH MEMORY



Flash memory first came to prominence in the British High Street during the winter of 1985



Corruption used to be a common problem, resulting in irretrievable loss of data



But these days flash memory is very reliable and can be used to process data everywhere.